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I.—NOTES ON THE ABORIGINAL TERMINOLOGY OF
THE GENESEE RIVER.¹

BY GEORGE H. HARRIS.

When Columbus sailed westward upon an unknown sea his objective destination was India, the most celebrated of all the countries of Asia. Situated on the river Indus, from which it derived its name, this opulent country had become famed among the early nations, who termed the people Indians.

Upon landing in America Columbus supposed he had reached India, and applied the name Indians to the inhabitants of San Salvador. Europeans continued the use of that term and the red men of America became universally known by an appellation that originally had no corresponding word in their languages.

Equally improper is the term Aborigines as applied to the race of red men. Preceding it in the occupation of this continent were other races of men whose history we may never know, but whose grim relics and imperishable monuments still remain an indisputable evidence of their earlier presence.² Long usage has fixed the names Aborigines and Indians upon the native race, and we accept and apply those titles as though the red men were in fact the primitive inhabitants of the land.

Our definite knowledge of the Indians dates from the landing of Columbus in 1492. The ante-Columbian history of these people is derived mainly from their mythology. If we accept the belief of the red men, regarding their origin—as expressed in their traditions—they “sprang out of the earth” on the grounds of their early occupation; or, as explained by Dr. Morgan,³ they have been here for so great a period they have lost all knowledge of their nativity and know not whence their forefathers came. Cusic, a native historian,⁴ asserts that the red men dwelt here six thousand years ago, that they were contemporary with the mastodon, whose ponderous bones, occasionally unearthed within the limits of Rochester, have resisted the elements of decay for a period of time which geologists say may exceed one thousand years.

¹Read before the Rochester Historical Society, June 13, 1889.

²Peck's History of Rochester, p. 14.

³League of the Iroquois, by Lewis H. Morgan, p. 7.

⁴Ancient History of Six Nations, by David Cusic, p. 20.

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The Icelandic Sagas tell us the Indians possessed our eastern sea-coast in the ninth century, and they had long occupied the interior. When Achaius reigned in Scotland (787-819) and Egbert founded the kingdom of England (827) Indian warriors trod the trails of the Genesee country, their hunters roamed the plains and the smoke of their wigwams ascended from the openings of its primeval forests. "When the continent itself was first occupied," says Schoolcraft, "when the impulse of population began its movement, and how far it proceeded in the career of conquest and the division of nations and languages, we cannot pretend with any certainty to say. . . . It was evident, however, as soon as inquiry began to be properly directed to the subject, that, while the territory of North America was overspread with a multiplicity of tribes and bands, each bearing a separate name, and claiming separate sovereignty, there were but few generic stocks; and that the diversity noticed by Europeans, and insisted on by the aborigines themselves, had arisen chiefly from the progress and development of languages among rude and unlettered tribes. Distinct from this diversity of language they might have all been called One People."

When Europeans penetrated the interior of New York in the seventeenth century, they found a portion of the present state in the possession of a confederacy of Indian nations, known in later years as the League of the Iroquois. The people comprising this league belonged to that linguistic family designated Huron-Iroquois. Tradition locates their early ancestral home on the lower waters of the St. Lawrence. North of them in Canada dwelt the fierce Algonkins, with whom they were continually at war. It is asserted that many hundreds of years ago, these two great families of hereditary enemies united their forces and overthrew a people known as Allegewi, from whom the Allegany mountains derived their name, who then owned and occupied the country south and west of the great lakes. The conquerors spread over the new territory; time and minor migrations effected separations of the original Huron and Algonkin stocks, and in their places grew up other nations.

At a period described in aboriginal mythology as corresponding with the ninth or tenth centuries, two tribes living on the St. Lawrence became involved in war with the Adirondacs, to whom they were tributary, and, like the Israelites of old, departed from the land of their oppressors. Uniting their forces the refugees ascended the St. Lawrence river, passed out upon the broad bosom of Lake Ontario,

and turning the prows of their little crafts to the south, coasted the shore seeking a favorable point to invade the country. The accounts of this migration vary, and legendary lore fails to include any reference to the methods of invasion and conquest, beyond the supposition that the two tribes entered the territory at the Chouaguen or Oswego, and Casconchiagon or Genessee rivers, and were again united near the Oswego, from whence they journeyed as one people down the Mohawk and Hudson rivers to the ocean.

David Cusic, whose quaint book records the incidents of this journey as related by the Tuscaroras,¹ says the main body returned up the Hudson, and six families entered into a friendly alliance. The first family settled near the Hudson, and are known in modern history as Mohawks. The second family, now called Oneidas, located on the bank of a creek two and a half days' journey westward of the first. The third family, or Onondagas, took up its residence at Onondaga, the fourth or Cayugas, at Cayuga lake, and the fifth or Senecas, between Lakes Seneca and Canandaigua. The sixth family, or Tuscaroras, wandered west and south to Carolina.

The territory originally occupied by the first five families lay between Hudson river and Lake Canandaigua. These families increased in numerical strength until they attained the dignity of separate nations possessing tribal divisions. About the middle of the fifteenth century they united in a confederacy or alliance, governed by fifty sachems. Their territory now stretched from the Hudson to the Genessee, from Lake Ontario to the headwaters of the Susquehanna river. In the figurative language of their race, they likened their league to the form of their houses, which were extended by continuous additions for new families until they were two or three hundred feet in length. These dwellings were called "long houses," and the people applied that term in the singular to their confederacy.

In Mohawk the name is "Ka-non-si-on ni," a compound word formed of ka-non-sa, house, and ion-ni, extended or drawn out, signifying "extended house."² The Seneca form is "Ho-dé-no-sau-nee," or "people of the long house," differing slightly in meaning from the Mohawk.

The French who came in contact first with the Mohawks, termed that nation Hirocois or Iroquois, and applied the same name to all

¹See also Legends, Customs and Social Life of the Seneca Indians, by Rev. J. W. Sanborn, p. 11.

²Iroquois Book of Rites, by Horatio Hale, M. A., 79.

members of the league. The English, who were more closely associated with the Iroquois, learned to distinguish the separate governments and termed them collectively the Five Nations. About 1712 the Tuscaroras were expelled from Carolina and returning to New York, reunited with the other families, settling between the Oneidas and Onondagas. Thereafter the confederacy was called the Six Nations of Iroquois.

The mother-tongue of these nations was Huron as spoken by the Mohawks, but differences in location and the introduction of foreign words in time produced variations in speech, or dialects. While the intercourse maintained in family and council between the Iroquois served to preserve a certain unity in language, and some words are identical in all the tribes, others exhibiting a slight difference caused by sectional accent,—the dialectical variation in the speech of the Six Nations is distinctly marked.

At the origin of the league the Senecas were located at the western end of the national territory or long house, and guarded the confederacy from all enemies in that direction; hence they were termed "door-keepers" of the league. In Mohawk they were called *Ro-na-nin-ho-hon-ti*, "the door-keepers," or literally "they who are at the doorway." In the singular this became *Ro-nin-ho-hon-ti*, or "door-keeper," a term sometimes applied to the entire Seneca nation,¹ whose two principal chiefs, as hereditary guardians of the western door of the long house, held the rank of military commanders of the league. In Seneca the term was rendered *Ho-nan-ne-hó-ont*, or the "door-keeper;"² but this was properly a league name.

The Seneca, as well as each other nation of the league, had a descriptive title by which it was usually designated by other people. As the country then occupied by them was mountainous,³ the Senecas were mentioned by other nations by dialectical terms identifying them with hills or mountains, the most prominent features of their place of residence. These appellations were derived from the root *o-non-da*, hill, with its qualifying adjectives *go-wa*, or *go-wah-nah*, big or great. There were many dialectical forms and combinations of these words, the signification being nearly identical. The modern Seneca term is *Nun-dá-wä-o-no*, or Great hill people, compounded from *o-non-dá-wa*, great hill, and *o-no*, people. The name Seneca,

¹The Iroquois Book of Rites, 79.

²League of the Iroquois, 97.

³The principal town was on Bare Hill, in Middlesex, Yates Co.

by which the nation is now denominated, is a modernized form wholly unknown to the primitive nation.

The Iroquois had few, if any, places of permanent residence. While they sometimes lingered many years in one locality, their towns were frequently moved to new locations. From their ancient seat east of Lake Canandaigua, the Senecas migrated slowly westward. The sites of their old villages are scattered over the country from Seneca lake to Lake Erie. The date of occupation of some of these former abodes of the Senecas are well known, but in numerous cases no record regarding them exists, and it is only within the past half century that public attention has been specially directed to their identification; a work the writer hopes in time to accomplish. In the restricted limits of this paper only a few points of special interest can be presented.

The most important natural feature of the country between Seneca lake and Lake Erie was the Genesee river. The eastern bank of the stream formed the western boundary of the Iroquois till the middle of the seventeenth century. Prior to that period the country south of Lake Ontario, from the lower Genesee to Lake Huron, was owned by a powerful nation, known to the Senecas as Kah-kwa, to the the Hurons as Attiwandaronk, and to the French as Neutral. This last name was given by the French from the fact that the nation remained neutral in the wars existing between the Iroquois and the Hurons of Canada. In 1649 the Iroquois conquered the Hurons, and about 1651 destroyed the Kah-kwas. In 1656 they exterminated the Eries, who dwelt south of the Kah-kwas between Lake Erie and the upper Genesee. Rapidly increasing in numbers and skill of arms they overran the country from the Hudson to Lake Huron, from the back lakes of Canada to the Tennessee river.

To make good their losses in war the Iroquois adopted individuals, and occasionally entire tribes, from conquered nations. Words from a variety of foreign dialects were thus grafted on the mother tongue, producing a language whose component parts included Huron-Iroquois, Kah-kwa, Erie, Andaste, Tuscarora, Delaware, Cherokee, besides many terms borrowed from unknown and unnumbered lesser tribes brought into intimate association with the conquerors.

With the exception of Erie, there is no distinct geographical title in western New York that perpetuates the memory of the two mighty nations who once owned the territory west of Genesee river. The streams, the hills, the plains, the towns, are known by names selected

from the vocabulary of the white man, except in a few instances where modernized forms of Iroquois terminology serve as reminders of the last red possessors.

The most prominent of these aboriginal names is the word Genesee, a modern form of the ancient descriptive term Zon-es-ché-o, by which the Iroquois designated the Genesee valley between Avon and Mt. Morris. The word was varied according to the pronunciation of individuals, or difference in tribal dialects, as Zon-es-che-o, Chen-nu-as-sio, Gen-ish-a-u, Jen-ess-he-o, Gen-is-haw, Gen-nee-see-o, Gen-ness-see; or to express certain meanings, as Gen-ish-a-u, "shining, clear opening," Chen-ne-sí-co, "pleasant, clear opening," Gen-nis-he-o, "beautiful valley," Gen-ne-seé, "clear valley" or "pleasant, open valley."

The river was known to the Iroquois in its entirety simply as gah-hun-da, a large stream; but various sections along its course bore appellations descriptive of prominent objects or striking features peculiar to the immediate neighborhoods described; and Zon-es-che-o referred to the channel only in the section of the valley bearing that name. When the first village of Senecas was established in that quarter, the inhabitants were identified by other Iroquois as Zon-es-che-os, a purely geographical designation. In time as the Zon-es-che-o, or Genesee Indians advanced in national importance, their locative title was given to all the valley and river; but the established orthography of the word was not generally adopted until after the revolutionary war, when the whole of western New York became known as the Genesee country.

The Indians seldom considered an un-navigable stream of much importance, and as the canoe navigation of the upper Genesee practically ceased near the present site of Angelica, in Allegany county, they termed that place Gä-ne-ó-wěh-ga-yat, considering it literally as the "head of the stream."

Caneadea, like Genesee, comprehended a section of several miles of the river above Portage. The name is derived from the Seneca locative Gah-ó-yah-de-o. The word is given differently according to the shade of meaning as, "the heavens rest upon the earth," "where the heavens rest upon the earth," etc. It is related by aged Senecas that in early days the country about Caneadea was densely wooded. In one place near the river there was a large open space in the forest, possibly one of the great clearings made by the unknown people who preceded the Senecas in ownership

of the soil. The main trail up the river ran through this opening, and when parties entered the glade the sky appeared to close the opposite end, or "touch the earth." The Indians described the spot as "the place where the sky (or heavens) rest (or lean) upon the earth," and the description was so appropriate that no red man could mistake the location. When the Senecas established a settlement at the place it received the descriptive name of the locality which also included the river. In later years the term was applied to a creek, and finally became the title of the reservation including the former sites of several villages.

The commonplace name of Rush creek is the English form of the Indian descriptive title of the Genesee at the mouth of the creek, where a swift current was the peculiar feature of the river. The Seneca name is Shou-witty-ye, and means "rushing waters."

Wiscoy is the anglicised name of the river at the lower angle of the Caneadea reservation. There is some uncertainty regarding the definition. The word is said to be a compound including the Seneca numeral adjective "wis," and its signification, "the creek with five falls." An Indian village located near the confluence of the river and creek was designated O-wa-is-ki, and the interpretation is given as "under the banks." As the village was really situated on a flat the description is not perfect, but the term was recognized as one that designated that particular section of the Genesee in the days of Indian occupation, and its true meaning may hereafter be accurately determined.

The falls in the Genesee at Portage were known by the same names borne by a similar class of natural features at Rochester; but various points were described in more definite terms. Many words formerly in common use by the Senecas, have become obsolete, and the continual compounding and abbreviation of terms have in numerous instances so obscured their original roots and meanings that excellent authorities in the dialect disagree in their interpretations. Regarding the signification of Nunda there are different explanations. Certain of the present generation of Senecas say the word means "a field of potatoes," averring that the dialectical term for potatoes is o-nun-nudah. This closely resembles o-non-da-deh, the ancient term signifying that the hills or mountains "rise up," in its abbreviated form indicating that the country is rough or "hilly." The Indian town of Nun-dow was named from this circumstance. The facts concerning the terminology of this region would form a chapter.

The name Gardow, given to the river near the former home of Mary Jemison, the old "white woman" captive, describes the great mural escarpment forming the east side of the channel opposite her residence. It is the hardened accent of Gah-dá-o, meaning "bank in front," and is probably akin to o-non-da-deh, though differing in orthography.

Da-yó-it-gǎ-o, "where the river issues from the hills," exactly describes the location where the waters of the Genesee after their long journey in the depths of the cheerless gorge of rock, emerge into bright sunlight near Mount Morris and pursue their onward course through the winding channel of the open valley. The name Squakie Hill, by which the west bank of the Genesee at this point is generally known, does not apply to the river. Like the word So-no-jo-wau-ga, the Indian title for Mount Morris on the opposite side, it was the name of a Seneca village.

The site of Geneseo was termed O-hä-di, which means "trees burned," or "scorched trees." It is still recounted by aged Cattaraugus Indians who were born in the Genesee valley, that this name had its origin in the attempt of some man to burn a tree when the surrounding woods took fire and all the forest in the neighborhood was burned or scorched. The incident, for some reason, became known to all Indians in the valley, and to the present day the Senecas mention Geneseo as O-ha-di, or as pronounced by some—O-hot-ti.

When Mary Jemison and Gordon, the latter a white captive from the Ohio, first resided with the Senecas in the Genesee valley during the old French war, there was a large Indian village, which Mrs. Jemison called Gen-is-hau, on the flats near the mouth of Fall brook. William Markham, in company with four other soldiers from General Bradstreet's army, visited the place in 1764. It was then the great town of the western Senecas, and termed the Chin-nee-see "castle" or residence of the principal sachem.

When the town removed to the west side of the valley on the present site of Cuylerville, where General Sullivan destroyed the settlement in 1779, it was still called the Chin-nee-see castle, but the locative term was De-o-nun-dä-ga-o, descriptive of the place "where the hill is near." The principal chief was then known as Little Beard, in distinction to Long Beard of Caneadea, and when the village was rebuilt it was termed Little Beard's town.

The Indian village of Ga-no-wau-ges was on the west side of the river, nearly two miles from the modern village of Avon, on the trail

between Avon and Caledonia. The name is variously interpreted, the accepted version being "the fetid waters," in allusion to the strong scent from the waters of the mineral springs in that locality.

Two or three miles below Ga-no-wau-ges, as the river runs, a mighty elm stood like a lone giant, towering above the open flat on the present estate of Guy Markham, a grandson of William Markham the colonial soldier who visited the Genesee castle at Fall brook in 1764. This great tree was the forest-king of the Genesee valley. At the smallest place in the trunk it was eleven feet in diameter. Its circumference just below the branches was thirty-eight feet, and one yard above the ground it measured forty-five feet. At noon it shaded an acre of ground, and was considered the largest tree in the Indian settlements along the Genesee. The Seneca name was Kon-gah-go-wah, or Kon-gah-go-wah-nah, from kon-gah, "elm," and go-wah, or go-wah-nah, "big" or "largest;" literally "elm-largest," or as rendered in English "the largest elm." It constituted a local monument of magnificent proportions, easily recognized by the unlettered natives whose light canoes skimmed the surface of the river in that vicinity.

Black creek, six miles south of Rochester, and Red creek, which enters the river through the new Genesee Valley park in the city, were distinguished by the color of the waters in the respective streams, as Te-car-na-gă-ge, "black waters," and Gwa-tah-ah, "red;" but each creek had other names the history of which would occupy several pages.

Each distinct section of the Genesee from Red creek to Lake Ontario bore a descriptive title. The natural condition of the river from Red creek to the lower falls was, in the period of aboriginal occupation, very different from its present appearance. The deep water of the upper channel north of Elmwood avenue, shallowed up below the present bridge, making a good fording place over the ledge of limestone that then formed a rapid extending from the State dam to Court street. The river in that interval was choked by massive boulders, rendering the otherwise unobstructed waters exceedingly rough. In the Seneca this section was termed Gah-na-wan-deh, "a rough stream," or "rapids."

The falls were the most important characteristics of the river in the vicinity of Rochester. The Seneca for waterfall is Gah-sko-sa-deh. It has several forms of application. Collectively all the falls in Rochester would be Gah-sko-sa-deh-ne-o, or "many falls." If we wish to say "at the falls," the form would be Gaht-sko-sa-go; or if we speak

of the two steps of the lower falls it would be Gah-sko-sa-deh-nyoh, or "falls near together." The upper fall of about fourteen feet, once situated between the Erie canal aqueduct and Court street, was Gah-sko-so-ni-wah-aah, or Gah-sko-so-ne-wah, "little fall." The fall ninety feet in height north of the New York Central railroad bridge, was Gah-sko-so-wah-neh, or "great fall."

The lower fall just above Seneca Park bridge was called Gah-sko-sah-go, "under" or "below the falls;" rendered by some "at the falls," as specially designating the present site of Rochester, but the orthography of the term, as previously stated, should be Gaht-sko-sa-go. The Indians applied the locative more particularly to the river in the vicinity of the East Seneca park (formerly Brewer's) landing, where several of their trails converged on the bank. The primitive term was Gas-kon-cha-gon, another form of Gah-sko-sah-deh. This was applied to the channel generally from the lower fall to the lake, and was the earliest form adopted by white *voyageurs* on the coast of Lake Ontario, and was interchangeable with Gan-ia-ta-ron-to-quot, the aboriginal name of Irondequoit bay. This confusion of locatives arose from the fact that the Indians considered the bay the navigable or practical mouth of the river, and regarded the portages from the lower fall to the rapids, and from Irondequoit creek to the rapids, as the same portage crossed by different paths.





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